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Operation against Nicaragua rooted in Reagan's campaign

By ALFONSO CHARDY
Herald Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Details of the Reagan Administration's covert operations against Nicaragua remain largely secret, but enough information is available to piece together the origin and development of the plan some call "a slow-motion Bay of Pigs."

The account is based on information from a widening circle of congressional and administration sources.

It is believed that the Nicaraguan covert operation grew out of informal gatherings during the presidential campaign in 1980, when Reagan aides accused the Carter Administration of weakening U.S. intelligence capabilities in Central America.

According to campaign documents, it was decided early on that, if Ronald Reagan won, the United States would rebuild its intelligence network.

The work to organize a new monitoring ability in the area for the Central Intelligence Agency began shortly after Reagan took office.

Before covert action was planned, the State Department attempted to persuade Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government to halt its "Sovietization." It dispatched Thomas Enders, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, to Managua in the summer of 1981 to offer a nonaggression proposal.

What Enders offered was to rein in the counterrevolutionaries training in Florida and Honduras, in exchange for an end to Nicaraguan support for Salvadoran guerrillas and expulsion of 2,000 Cuban military advisers already in the country.

According to U.S. officials, the Nicaraguans rejected the offer, saying they could not accept negotiations because they were not helping the Salvadoran guerrillas.

By late 1981, high-level administration officials publicly vented their anger and impatience with Nicaragua.

"We have not given up on Nicaragua but the hours are growing short," said Alexander Haig, who as secretary of state also complained of a drift toward totalitarianism and an influx of Soviet-bloc military equipment into the Central American country.

It is understood now that on Dec. 2, 1981, Reagan formally set in motion the covert operation by signing a "presidential finding" — a statement, required by law, in which the President must certify a need for a specific covert operation.

Congressional oversight committees may not approve a covert operation "unless and until the President finds that each such operation is important to the national security."

Later, CIA Director William Casey told the committees in his first closed briefing on the subject that the presidential finding included "optimal" and "minimal" plans.

Under the optimal plan, the United States would provide funds and training for an existing anti-Sandinista force of 1,000 Nicaraguan exiles and for creation of another force of 500 commandos of various Latin American nationalities, including Cuban exiles. Both groups were to be directly supervised by Argentine military officers.

The optimal plan called for attacks on Cuban targets in Nicaragua, as well as on bridges, roads, farms and military posts.

The minimal plan — the one eventually put into effect — called for support of existing counterrevolutionary forces in Honduras in their attacks on economic targets and to stop the flow of arms to guerrillas in El Salvador.

The congressional committees approved the minimal-level plan and issued a set of guidelines for the CIA that ruled out U.S. involvement in any overthrow of the Sandinistas or in provoking a war between Nicaragua and Honduras.